

# The Syrian Situation and its Impacts on Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons

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## Key Points

- A critical game is being played in the Northeast of Syria to divide energy and territorial resources. Internal and external actors compete to secure a slice of the profits in the short, medium, and long term.
- Idlib and the Syrian Northwest are not only the home of millions of displaced people and thousands of jihadist militiamen. The city is now the land of opportunity for Turkey and its local customers, enriching themselves thanks to territorial fragmentation and humanitarian emergencies.
- The reopening of internal trade crossings will be of immediate benefit to ordinary people and send a clear political signal: Russia and its ally Assad are stability players and protect the interests of the Syrians.
- The Al-Hol camp should not only be considered as a tactical problem, but a strategic one.
- Foreign countries should comply with the Autonomous Administration's repeated calls to repatriate detainees not charged with a crime, prioritizing the most vulnerable.

## Introduction

In 2020 the conflict in Syria was further exacerbated by the country's worst economic crisis since 2011, international sanctions, and the COVID-19 pandemic. In this challenging socio-economic situation, a so-called oligopoly, encompassing Syrian and non-Syrian entities has formed. For years, the entities that make up the oligopoly have accumulated wealth, power, and social status; regardless of the geopolitical, ideological, presumed, or real enmities of the community.

It has been 10 years since protests against the government of President Bashar al-Assad, which erupted on March 15, 2011 in the wake of the so-called Arab Spring,<sup>1</sup> quickly ignited the fire of the civil war. After a decade of bloody

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<sup>1</sup> History Editors, "Arab Spring," History, Jan 10, 2018, <https://www.history.com/topics/middle-east/arab-spring> (Accessed 2 May, 2021).

clashes, Assad's government is still in its place in an unpacified, divided, and economically devastated country. Although fighting has subsided in many areas, the conflict does not appear to be close to a political solution. The Syrian conflict has caused a severe humanitarian crisis and inflicted immense suffering on the Syrian people. Human rights and international humanitarian law are not being respected, and the situation remains precarious. The severe situation in Syria was highlighted by General Kenneth McKenzie in an April, 2021 speech.<sup>2</sup> The CENTCOM Commander said that the radicalization of children in camps in Syria for the Islamic State represents the greatest threat to the region. The need to curb the spread of the group's ideology can only be applied through the repatriation of the children. General McKenzie described the horrendous conditions of the al-Hol camp, which houses some 65,000 people, as a "tactical problem" that should worry the United States and other actors, but stressed the spread of ISIS ideology as a "more strategic problem."

The difficult economic situation is accompanied by social problems as evidenced by a recent assessment made by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Geneva<sup>3</sup> on the humanitarian crisis in Syria ten years after hostilities started. According to the ICRC, the needs in Syria and neighboring countries remain immense, and assistance to displaced persons, refugees, and people affected by poverty is still essential. According to reports from the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), the IDP (internally displaced person) camps' issue could become a "time bomb," capable of unleashing a wave of chaos, especially in northeastern Syria. Al-Hol,<sup>4</sup> located in the far South-East of Hasakah, is placed under the control of the Kurdish authorities affiliated with the international anti-ISIS coalition.<sup>5</sup> The site is home to more than 65,000 people, including over 11,000 family members of suspected ISIS fighters of various nationalities, including tens of thousands of women and children from Syria and Iraq. These figures represent a considerable burden for the Kurdish forces, who often also have to deal with crime incidents and numerous escape attempts.

### **North-East Syria and Iraq: A Critical Game for Energy and Territorial Resources**

Internal and external actors compete to secure a slice of the profits in the short, medium, and long term. The city of Qamishli<sup>6</sup> has become the urban epicenter of this confrontation which is made up of periodic armed clashes<sup>7</sup> with continuous negotiations and convergence of interests. Qamishli, with a population of about 200,000 people,

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<sup>2</sup> Sheren Khalel, "US military chief warns radicalization of children in Syrian camps is major threat," Middle East Eye, Apr 27, 2021, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syria-islamic-state-children-radicalisation-top-concern-us-centcom-commander> (Accessed Apr 27, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Adnan Hezam, Sara Alzawqari, Ruth Hetherington, "Millions of young Syrians paid heavy toll during "decade of loss," International Committee of Red Cross, Mar 21, 2021, <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/icrc-millions-young-syrians-paid-heavy-toll-during-decadesavage-loss> (Accessed Apr 27, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, "al -Hawl," Mar 21, 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Hawl> (Accessed Apr, 21, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Katie Bo Williams "Coalition Plans To Expand Giant ISIS Prison In Syria," Defense One news, Feb 24, 2021, <https://www.defenseone.com/policy/2021/02/coalition-plans-expand-giant-isis-prison-syria/172270/> (Accessed Apr 22, 2021). <sup>6</sup> The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "Al-Qāmishlī," Britannica news, <https://www.britannica.com/place/al-Qamishli> (Accessed May, 1, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> Associated Press, "Russian Military Intervenes to Halt Clashes in Syrian City," US news, Apr 27, 2021, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2021-04-27/russian-military-intervenes-to-halt-clashes-in-syrian-city> (Accessed May 2, 2021).

<sup>8</sup> Sarah Leah, "Repression of Kurdish Political and Cultural Rights in Syria," Human Rights Watch Group Denial, Nov 26, 2009, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2009/11/26/group-denial/repression-kurdish-political-and-cultural-rights-syria> (Accessed May 1, 2021).

is the capital of the ally autonomous region controlled by Kurdish forces. It was the scene in 2004<sup>8</sup> of the most significant Kurdish-Syrian popular uprising against Damascus' repressive practices. Today's city appears as a crossroads and overlap of visions and interests in a rapidly changing political, military, economic, social, and cultural context. It is located in the heart of one of the most resource-rich Middle Eastern areas: oil and water first of all, and then agricultural lands, which are considered a big granary. Qamishli is a stone's throw from three borders: the Syrian-Turkish, the Syrian - Iraqi, and the Turkish-Iraqi. To the East passes the Euphrates; to the West the Tigris; the Khabur, a tributary of the Euphrates, is another river that passes through the region; Jaghjagh, which passes through Qamishli and hails from its Turkish sister city Nusaybin, is a tributary of the Khabur.

Over the past ten years, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) has become, through its Syrian wing, the local hegemonic player in the area.<sup>2</sup> During this time, the PKK has been training militarily and receiving ideological indoctrination in the remote Iraq and Iran border region area of Qandil. In northeastern Syria, photos of President Bashar al-Assad have long been removed and replaced by those of a figure few dare dispute: Abdullah Öcalan.<sup>10</sup>

Kurdish forces in Qamishli and throughout northeast Syria rule according to traditional power dynamics. The Kurdish-Syrian authorities manage the territory with US and Russian support, relying on old and new clientele networks legitimized by family and tribal balances. Similar to the entire region, Qamishli and its surroundings are plagued by the effects of a continuing economic and financial crisis which is only fully exacerbated by the COVID19 pandemic. Official COVID-19 data is unreliable due to the difficulties of health and administrative structures to deal with the situation. The vaccination campaign has not even begun. The first doses of vaccines sent arrived in Syrian government-controlled areas and in the North-Western regions held by Turkey.

### **Idlib and North-Western Syria**

For centuries, Idlib was considered a decentralized city with the passage of trade between Asia and Europe and between the Mediterranean coast and the hinterland. It has been long promoted as a significant institutional and business hub. Idlib, under multi-dimensional Turkish influence, has acted independently from the Damascus regime for more than eight years. Generally speaking, the reference to Idlib is associated almost exclusively with two phenomena: the presence of armed groups powerfully designed with Sunni jihadism and millions of civilians in "urgent need of humanitarian aid."<sup>3</sup> These two phenomena can be reduced to two key words: terrorists and migrants.

The whole of northwestern Syria is in Turkish hands with one substantial difference: Ankara's forces directly control the territories from Afrin to the outskirts of Manbij; those around Idlib and west of Aleppo are under Turkish influence, but are formally controlled by armed groups gathered under an acronym that combines several

<sup>2</sup> Sinan Hatahet, "The Political Economy of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria," European University Institute, Nov 2, 2019, [https://medirections.com/images/dox/MED\\_WPCS\\_2019\\_16.pdf](https://medirections.com/images/dox/MED_WPCS_2019_16.pdf) (Accessed May 3, 2021).

<sup>10</sup>The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "Abdullah Öcalan," Britannica news, Mar 31, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Abdullah-Ocalan> (Accessed Apr 30, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Ben Hubbard, "In a Syrian Rebel Bastion, Millions Are Trapped in Murky, Violent Limbo," The New York Times news, Apr 14, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/06/world/middleeast/syrian-war-refugees.html> (Accessed May 3 2021).

<sup>12</sup> Menekse Tokyay, "Ankara, Kremlin discuss reopening of crossing points in Syria," Arab News, Mar 25, 2021, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1831862/middle-east> (Accessed Apr 27, 2021).

opposition groups led by the former Syrian wing of Al-Qaida. Ankara's expansionist policy could not succeed without the green light from Russia and Iran, Damascus' prominent supporters. The delicate diplomatic and political balance between Ankara, Moscow and Tehran might not be as stable as it seems.

Idlib is where traffic passes between Turkey and areas controlled by the Russians, Iranians, and Syrian government.<sup>12</sup> A few dozen kilometers further South of the city runs the highway border between the areas controlled by Moscow and Erdoğan's troops. The Turkish military troops and their local Asdari support are located north of the now famous M4, on the stretch between Saraqeb and Jisr ash-Shughur.

### Trade and Russian Influence

The economic crisis, to different degrees, affects the whole region. There is an oligopoly formed by entities - Syrian and non-Syrian - which benefits from territorial fragmentation. For years it has accumulated wealth, power, social status, regardless of geopolitical, ideological, presumed or real community enmities. This situation is of particular concern to Russia, which is interested in keeping the regime in Damascus in place. Therefore, we must consider the Russian move that pushed Turkey and the Kurdish forces to open internal crossing points for trade.<sup>4</sup> Such action could significantly reduce transaction costs, thus driving down the prices of consumer goods. Russia has long imposed the closure of most border crossings between Syria and Iraq and Syria and Jordan. Humanitarian aid can only enter via two border crossing points between Syria and Turkey, giving Moscow more negotiating power. By doing so, Russia is pushing the actors to regard Damascus as the only legitimate interlocutor for humanitarian aid, but still leaves the Turkish partner a role as a co-leader. If internal trade crossing points are opened, the prices of goods in the various areas may align. Whereas now, in the context of territorial fragmentation, traffickers earn a great deal from the price disparity between one area and another through smuggling.<sup>5</sup>

The reopening of internal trade crossings will be of almost immediate benefit to ordinary people, sending a clear political signal: Russia and its ally Assad are stability players and protect the interests of everyday Syrians. Russia recently announced<sup>6</sup> an agreement with Turkey to open three trade crossing points in the North-West, between the area under the control of the central government and the area held by armed opposition close to Ankara. The announcement was not followed by official confirmation from Turkey or other actors on the ground. Before the announcement, Russian and government actions tightened against Turkish economic and trade interests, the Syrian opposition, and Kurdish forces in the North-West and the North.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Mohammed Hardan, "Kurdish forces agree to deliver oil, Syrian regime reopens crossings," Al Monitor news, Apr 8, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/04/kurdish-forces-agree-deliver-oil-syrian-regime-reopens-crossings> (Accessed Apr 25, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Mayassa Awad, James Andre', "Lebanon-Syria: Smuggling and sanctions, the new front line" France 24 news, Apr 16, 2021 <https://www.france24.com/en/tv-shows/reporters/20210416-lebanon-syria-smuggling-and-sanctions-the-new-front-line> (Accessed Apr 30, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> Qamishli, Asharq Al-Awsat Russia, "Turkey Agree to Reopen Crossing Points in Syria's Idlib, Aleppo," Al-Awsat news, Mar 25, 2021, <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/2880867/russia-turkey-agree-reopen-crossing-points-syrias-idlib-aleppo> (Accessed Apr 2021).

<sup>7</sup> Daily Sabah with AA, "Turkey denies reaching deal with Russia to open Syria crossings" Daily Sabah news, Mar 25, 2021, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkey-denies-reaching-deal-with-russia-to-open-syria-crossings> (Accessed Apr 30, 2021).

Convoys of trucks carrying oil and grain from the northeast were bombed by US-backed Kurdish forces.<sup>8</sup> Local oil refineries in the Jarablos area, north of Aleppo<sup>9</sup> had also been attacked. Above all, towns near Bab al Hawa, the border crossing between Turkey and Syria, west of Idlib<sup>10</sup>, had been affected. In particular, the area of Sarmada, a frontier town transformed into the commercial capital of The North-West, had been hit. Almost all the goods imported from Turkey to Syria pass through Bab al-Hawa, Sarmada.<sup>11</sup> These goods are subsequently distributed not only in the areas under Turkish direct and indirect control, but also in the government and Kurdish ones. It must be seen as an essential factor in contextualizing Russia's decision to open internal trade crossing points. Territorial fragmentation and political-military division have not prevented goods, both imported and locally produced, from moving from one area to another in recent years.

Smugglers secure huge profits as a consequence of trade crossing points' closure and are linked to armed groups or have themselves set up armed groups to defend their interests. They are connected to local institutions, town mayors, governors, external actors, militias, and armed forces present on Syrian territory.

### **The Syrian Refugee Crisis**

The Syrian crisis has resulted in an estimated death toll of 250,000 civilians and is the biggest refugee and displacement crisis of our time.<sup>12</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that there are 5.5 million Syrian refugees around the world and that even more are displaced persons within the country.<sup>13</sup> In Syria, more than 13 million people need humanitarian assistance. Syrian refugees are faced with two realities: they cannot return to their land for fear of being persecuted; but are poorly tolerated in the host countries. Over 6 million Syrians have found refuge outside Syria, mostly in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey, but their lives are becoming increasingly harsh.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> News Syria, "US military forces steal wheat crops in Syria's Hasakah, move them to Iraq: SANA," Presstv news, Apr 1, 2021, <https://www.presstv.com/Detail/2021/04/01/648540/US-military-forces-steal-wheat-crops-in-Syria-Hasakah-move-them-to-Iraq-SANA> (Accessed Apr 30, 2021).

<sup>9</sup> Syria Observatory for Human Rights, "Russian rocket attacks on oil market and refineries One person killed and others injured in northeast Aleppo," Syria Hr news, Mar 5, 2021, <https://www.syriahr.com/en/207547/> (Accessed Apr 30, 2021).

<sup>10</sup> Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "Russian jets hit gas facilities and civilian areas near Turkish border, witnesses and rebels say," Reuters news, Mar 21, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-idlib/russian-jets-hit-gas-facilities-and-civilian-areas-near-turkish-borderwitnesses-and-rebels-say-idUSKBN2BD0E2> (Accessed Apr 30, 2021).

<sup>11</sup> Enab Baladi-Ali Darwish, "Domestic and border crossings: Russia's mean to stifle northern Syria," Enab Baladi news, Apr 2, 2021, <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2021/04/domestic-and-border-crossings-russias-mean-to-stifle-northern-syria/> (Accessed Apr 30, 2021).

<sup>12</sup> SOHR, "Total Death Toll," Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Jun 01 2021, <https://www.syriahr.com/en/217360/> (Accessed Jul 21, 2021).

<sup>13</sup> UNHCR, "Syria Emergency," The UN Refugee Agency, Mar 15 2021, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/syria-emergency.html> (Accessed May 3, 2021).

<sup>14</sup> UNHCR, "Syria Refugee Crisis Explained," UN Refugee news, Feb 5, 2021, <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/syria-refugee-crisisexplained/> (Accessed May 4, 2021).

According to the UN, around 2.7 million IDPs are located in North-West Syria.<sup>15</sup> In all, about four million Syrians – mostly women and children – are exposed to varying degrees of "humanitarian need" according to the UN. These evacuees have come from other war-affected areas: Daraa, Qunaytra, Dayr az-Zawr, Raqqa, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, and Ghuta near Damascus.<sup>16</sup> In Lebanon, nine out of ten Syrians live in extreme poverty. In addition, millions of Jordanians, Lebanese, Turks, and Iraqis from host communities are now living below the poverty line due to the loss of livelihoods, rising unemployment, and COVID-19 consequences. Syria's neighbors have hosted millions of Syrian refugees, taking on significant responsibilities. Their economies, already scarce of resources, infrastructure, and communities are under enormous pressure. Outside the region, a wave of solidarity with Syrian refugees has led many governments to change policies and take concrete actions to help both Syrians and host countries through tools such as resettlement, family reunifications, humanitarian visas, scholarships, and other safe and regular routes.

### **Security in the Al-Hol Refugee Camp**

Al-Hol is home to more than 65,000 people, including more than 11,000 family members of suspected ISIS fighters of different nationalities, including tens of thousands of women and children from Syria and Iraq.<sup>17</sup> These figures represent a huge burden on the Kurdish forces, which often also must face criminal activities and numerous escape attempts. About 50,000 members of Kurdish forces stationed in northeast Syria were engaged in the March 28th<sup>27</sup> al-Hol refugee camp security operation to hunt down Islamic State supporters. It was a Kurdish-led operation in collaboration with the US-led Combined Joint Task Force's Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR). According to pro-Kurdish sources, the operation led to the arrest of 9 individuals, including an Iraqi member of ISIS who was involved in recruiting fighters from inside the camp, Abu Saad al-Iraqi.<sup>18</sup> According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights' director, Rami Abdul Rahman,<sup>19</sup> more than 30 people were arrested in and around al-Hol. As stated by the spokesman of the US-led anti-ISIS coalition, Colonel Wayne Marotto, the operation aimed to improve refugee safety levels.

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<sup>15</sup> ECHO, "ECHO Factsheet-Syria, Relief Web news, Jan 15, 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/echo-factsheet-syria-last-updated15012021> (Accessed Apr 28, 2021).

<sup>16</sup> UNHCR, "International Protection Considerations with Regard to People Fleeing the Syrian Arab Republic," UNHCR Refugee Agency, Mar 2021, <https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2049565/606427d97.pdf> (Accessed May 3 2021).

<sup>17</sup> Human Rights Watch press, "Thousands of Foreigners Unlawfully Held in NE Syria," HRW News, Mar 23, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/23/thousands-foreigners-unlawfully-held-ne-syria> (Accessed Apr 28, 2021). <sup>27</sup> Asharq Al-Awsat press, "Kurds Say 53 ISIS Members Arrested in Syria's Al-Hol Camp" Asharq Al-Awsat, Mar 30, 2021, <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/2890811/kurds-say-53-isis-members-arrested-syrias-al-hol-camp> (Accessed May 3 2021).

<sup>18</sup> DW Press, "Syria: Kurdish forces arrest suspected IS supporters in raid," DW news, Mar 28, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/syriakurdish-forces-arrest-suspected-is-supporters-in-raid/a-57033907> (Accessed Apr 28, 2021).

<sup>19</sup> AFP, Beirut, "Dozens of ISIS family members arrested in Syria's al-Hol Camp: Monitor," Alarabiya News, Mar 28, 2021, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2021/03/28/Dozens-of-ISIS-family-members-arrested-in-Syria-s-al-Hol-Camp-Monitor> (Accessed Apr 28, 2021).

## **Conclusion**

The current situation of economic crisis is having repercussions on the political stability of the regime. Poverty is now increasingly widespread among the population including those sectors of society that supported al-Assad undermining trust in the government. In the absence of general economic stability, the Syrian President's ability to maintain power is increasingly linked to the degree of support from the security forces which are partly linked to Iran. Assad's dilemma is that the government is currently too weak to provide security, finance reconstruction, and maintain a minimum degree of services for the Syrian people. Al-Assad must increasingly depend on his allies, Russia and Iran, to secure its survival. However, relying on foreign powers also means progressively losing resources and legitimacy, which are the two main conditions for any political power to govern.

## **Recommendations for US/CENTCOM**

- Cooperate with international partners to develop an economic plan to support the reconstruction of Syria's territory.
- Support the creation of a regional security architecture that acknowledges the legitimate role of each regional stakeholder while asserting clear limits to any broader ambitions.
- Maintain military support in Syria to reduce terrorist activities and ensure peace and political stability across the Middle East region.
- Support Turkish efforts to establish a significant footprint in Syria in case of a full US withdrawal.
- Encourage Turkey to take a more significant effort in the fight against terrorism in accordance with common Coalition goals.
- Increase coordination with Russia, Turkey, other regional actors, and like-minded donors on refugee issues.
- Capitalize on the US' potential to influence issues relating to refugees in Syria.
- Leverage the strong relationship with the Lebanese Armed Forces to improve conditions for Syrian refugees.